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A harmonious Federal Council election

The Swiss People's Party has effortlessly gained a sought-after second Federal Council seat for Guy Parmelin. Is this sign of stability also a sign of easing tensions in the political climate?

JÜRG MÜLLER

Federal Palace Media Centre, late afternoon on 28 October 2015: Federal Councillor Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf steps before the microphone and opens with a sentence that nobody wants to hear: "First of all, I would like to report on the second phase of the Federal Council's energy strategy." In the second part of the media conference, following this build-up of suspense, the finance minister eventually comes to the question on most people's minds following the federal elections on 18 October: will she stand again in the complete re-election of the Federal Council? The answer is no. After the losses endured by her Swiss Conservative Democratic Party (BDP) at the National Council elections on 18 October, Ms Widmer-Schlumpf is relinquishing her post.

National Council chamber, morning of 9 December 2015, agenda item: complete re-election of the Federal Council. Following the smooth re-election of the six existing members of the Federal Council, attention now focuses on the vote to replace Ms Widmer-Schlumpf. At around noon, an announcement is made by National Council President, Christa Markwalder: "With 138 votes, the Council elects Guy Parmelin." With the entry of the SVP Councillor from Vaud onto the Federal Council, the party has achieved its aim after eight years. The new "magic formula" now reads: two seats for the SVP, two for the FDP, two for the SP and one for the CVP. The last time two SVP representatives sat on the Federal Council was between 2004 and 2007, in the form of Samuel Schmid and Christoph Blocher. However, after Mr Blocher was voted out of office, the party was no longer represented in national government, as it expelled Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, who had been elected as an SVP Federal Councillor, from its ranks. In protest, the BDP was founded, which both Ms Widmer-Schlumpf and Mr Schmid joined. Following Mr Schmid's retirement in 2008, Parliament elected Party President Ueli Maurer to the Federal Council. He was its only SVP member until the end of 2015.

Thanks to Guy Parmelin from canton Vaud the SVP has two representatives on the Federal Council again for the first time since 2007.

Clever power play by the SVP

After the SVP's victory in the federal elections on 18 October 2015, there was little reason to deny the strongest party in the country a second Federal Council seat. For a while, the left toyed with the idea of establishing a candidate from the centre parties, or at least launching a surprise candidacy from within the SVP's ranks. However, support for such manoeuvring proved to be limited. This was due not only to the poor performance of the centre at the elections, but to also a clever power play by the SVP: an exclusion clause, heavily criticised by all other parties, declared that Federal Council candidates that had not been officially nominated would automatically be expelled from the party. At the same time, the SVP presented a shortlist of three candidates, featuring representatives from all parts of the country. They were National Councillors Thomas Aeschi (Zug) and Guy Parmelin (Vaud), along with Norman Gobbi, a Cantonal Councillor for Ticino and member of the Lega dei Ticinesi, who had joined the SVP with an eye on the election. As early as the third round, Guy Parmelin had already established himself as favourite, while there was no sign of any surprise candidacies, despite the wild speculation in the run-up to the election.

With the election of a second SVP Federal Councillor, Parliament has placed the emphasis on stability. Although the Federal Council worked very well with Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf as a small-party representative, this also caused problems with regard to the concordance system. As a result, the SVP often regularly justified its policy of strong rhetoric and radical popular initiatives with its under-representation on the Federal Council. Whether the harmonious Federal Council election will lead to a relaxation of tensions in the political climate remains to be seen. The majority of political observers remain sceptical.

JÜRG MÜLLER IS AN EDITOR WITH THE "SWISS REVIEW"

From wine-grower to Federal Councillor

Guy Parmelin (born in 1959, married) lives in Bursins (VD) on Lake Geneva. He is an agriculturalist and wine-grower, and was elected to the National Council in 2003. Prior to this, he was a municipal councillor, member of cantonal parliament and, from 2000 to 2004, president of the SVP in Vaud. While not one of the party's tone-setters during his time on the National Council, he is considered intelligent, cooperative, sociable and approachable, as well as a shrewd tactician. The Federal Council now has three members from French-speaking Switzerland, the others being Didier Burkhalter and Alain Berset. (JM)